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THE UNIT OF INVESTIGATION OR OF CONSIDERATION IN SOCIOLOGY.

In the general literature of the social sciences during the past decade one cannot fail to notice an increased and almost disproportionate interest in the problems of theoretical sociology. Some advance has been made in definiteness of purpose, in uniformity of methods, and in identity of subject-matter. We have perhaps emerged once more from the cloud of discredit in scientific circles that surrounded sociology a generation ago. Yet progress in these directions is still very slow in proportion to the effort that is being put forth.

Apart from difficulties due to inadequate and inaccurate terminology we suffer most at the present time from lack of unity in the subject-matter of the science. No one can tell upon taking up a treatise on sociology whether he is going to find a discussion of prehistoric man, a discourse on ancient mythology and religion, a treatise on education, a tract on philanthropy or social reform, a discussion of some phase of the social question, or perhaps a volume of sermons. Sociologists could much better risk the dangers of dissensions among themselves by coming closer together and dealing with the same subject-matter than they can afford the consequences of the present isolated efforts in building up corners of a far too greatly generalized science. Unless there is a change for the better, "consciousness of kind" among sociologists themselves will soon be on the ebb. Professor Ross tried to start his readers on the right track when in beginning his articles on "Social Control" * he asked them to make all discussion of what society is, subordinate in the present stage of sociological theory to the consideration of what society does. If more writers would

* *American Journal of Sociology*, 1896-98.

assume that attitude in treating any problem of sociology it would prove to be a great unifying factor. In the articles referred to, Ross has purposely restricted his studies to a very small part of the inquiry suggested by the words, what society does, but the view-point implied in all his subsequent discussion is clearer and more satisfactory because he has those words in mind. How do social organization, social life, human intercourse and association arise and operate to modify the conditions of individual life, and how do these modifications in turn mould and shape social organization? These questions are fundamental for modern sociology and need but to be more vividly in sight to act as a concentrating and limiting factor in the subject-matter of our science.

Other concentrating and limiting factors are necessary, however, if we are to obtain the cumulative results of intensive cultivation. The willingness of so many sociological writers to mislead and be misled by analogies drawn from other sciences and their use of figures of speech which have been worked out with a definite meaning in the science where they are properly used, but which only serve to call up foreign thoughts and vain imaginations when applied to sociological data, combined with the attempt to make the terminology of the related social sciences do duty in two places with different meanings, has led to endless confusion. The gradual recognition of the unsatisfactory condition of affairs due to these causes is a sufficient reason for an optimistic view as to the final outcome. Other sciences have passed through the same experience. Recent studies in biology and psychology have resulted in more systematic and better co-ordinated knowledge on those subjects where the problems and limits of investigation are scarcely better determined, largely because, it seems to me, there has been a definitely recognized unit of consideration.

Great diversity of opinion has prevailed among biologists concerning the nature of the cell, but notwithstanding this,

the cell has been for all biologists a common starting point and a constantly recurring common meeting-ground in the treatment of the data of their science. Biologists engage also in fruitless discussions as to whether their science is something distinct from morphology, physiology, embryology, etc., or a science including them all in a higher unity;* but the results of their work maintain an outward unity because all newly acquired data are at once referred to some cell theory. No two biologists may be agreed in their theories concerning the cell, but it has served a most useful purpose as a unit of consideration.

In psychology the sensation has played a corresponding role. It is not defined in the same way by any considerable number of psychologists, but it occupies by common consent a central place in all psychological description and explanation. The atom in chemistry and the molecule in physics might be cited as illustrations of a somewhat analogous service performed by units of investigation and consideration in those sciences. The fundamental concepts of economics can hardly be said to be removed beyond the pale of controversy, and yet the science of economics is a definite body of knowledge largely because economists have had in the principle of the division of labor which presupposes the economic man a poorly defined but nevertheless commonly accepted unit of consideration. Is it possible to find in the data of sociology any constantly recurring factor in the socializing process which is fundamental to the concept of society in all stages of development, and which therefore can be regarded as a unit of investigation, consideration and reference for all truly sociological data?

Before attempting to answer the question just stated, it is necessary to examine more carefully exactly what we mean by a unit of investigation and consideration. I am not in search of a metaphysical entity—the datum of science—nor necessarily the primary fact given in experi-

* Sandeman, "Problems of Biology," p. 53, *et seq.*

ence within the subject-matter of our science. Dr. E. A. Singer has considered this problem in a very able paper * devoted to the use made of the sensation in psychology, and much that he has said concerning the futility of the search for such a datum of science I would willingly accept. In the general field of the social sciences, Mr. Arthur F. Bentley has discussed some of the fundamental units of investigation in this sense in a paper submitted to the Academy in 1895.† He finds impulse, custom and calculation on the part of individuals the true elements or units of investigation, which in combination with the knowledge that individuals possess of the physical world, of other individuals and of what he terms "social formations,"—that is, the objective series corresponding to custom on the subjective side,—give social phenomena in the sense in which the sociologist must subject them to scientific analysis. Mr. Bentley endeavors to show, and it seems to me that he does show, conclusively that it is these elements rather than groups of men that are the primary factors in sociology. But it is not in this sense that it is most desirable at the present time to search for a unifying factor in sociological discussion. We seek rather for something that can be taken by the sociologist as a standard, measure or test to be applied at the outset to social phenomena that belong to many social sciences in common, but phenomena which when viewed, grouped or analyzed in their relation to this unit are being treated in a way which it is the province of his science alone to do. Such a unit may be crude and capable of but poor definition in the early stages of the science and must needs be itself subjected constantly to criticism, discussion and analysis until it becomes in the history of the science a more definite and concrete concept. It is in this sense that it seems to me there must be one or

* Read at the meeting of the American Psychological Association, December, 1897.

† ANNALS, Vol. v., p. 915, May, 1894.

more units of consideration and of investigation which would prove invaluable tools in the upbuilding of the science of sociology if we can but come to a common recognition and general acceptance of them. In this paper I propose to examine briefly one such unit, which I will call *the social imperative*, and to contrast it from the point of view of its utility in sociological research with three other concepts which are commonly used in very much the same way that the units of consideration to which I refer would necessarily be employed. These three concepts are: (1) The family; (2) the social man; (3) the social type.

The social imperative is a concept in terms of which we can state all of the more important problems of sociology and about which we can group the social phenomena needed by our science in the specific work it has to do. The social imperative is the modifying influence which makes the individual act differently in the presence of his fellow-man from the way in which he would probably act under the same circumstances if he were alone. It is in the first place and in the highest sense the influence of personality. Thus in primitive society men try to maintain the outward semblance of the person in their thinking or speaking of such influences, and call them by names that imply animate existence long after they have passed over into social customs and institutions. In more complex societies the social imperative finds very definite expression and to the superficial observer would seem to be chiefly embodied in social customs and social institutions or in what Mr. Bentley calls social formations. Even here, however, the element of personality remains. It lies back of all social customs, institutions and formations. We seem to react upon our social environment in much the same way as we do upon our physical environment, but we never think of the state, a law, the church, the school in quite the same way as we do of the soil, the weather, the climate, our food and other

factors of the physical world. They may all be equally objective to us in making up our minds to follow a certain course of action, but a very little reflection causes us to think of animate things lying back of the objective outward form of the social environment. When we realize this distinction and visualize it in our actions, we do act differently in adjusting ourselves to animate influences from the way in which we adjust ourselves to inanimate nature. Why this is so is the business of the psychologist to tell us, but the fact is a primary one for sociology.*

The social imperative, then, is the sum of the animate influences, though these may be crystallized in complex societies, for the most part in institutions, customs and laws which are inanimate, which modify individual action in the direction of social ends. It is the social "ought" which makes certain kinds of activity and certain lines of conduct the badge of social ascendancy for a group or a society, and the requisite for success in the individual. It does not correspond, however, to the social standard which marks off one group from another within a given society or differentiates one society from another. A social standard is shared in about the same degree by all who belong to the group, while the social imperative is recognized in varying degrees by the members of a given society or group. It makes us ashamed not to profess certain virtues and not to avoid that which is generally denounced. An illustration of a very common form in which the social imperative is noticed in every-day experience occurred recently while I was out wheeling. A young lady in the party had a fall which must have caused considerable pain. She remarked, however, that she would not mind the fall at all if she could only get the dirt off her dress so that no one would know that she had had a fall.

* Baldwin in his discussion of the self as a person has treated this problem from the point of view of psychological analysis. See "Social and Ethical Interpretations," Cap. i.

Sovereignty offers perhaps the best concrete illustration of the social imperative, as it has been most generally recognized in the treatment of social phenomena, but political science has still a vast unoccupied territory to inhabit, as it analyzes the elements of personality lying back of sovereignty and the state and behind many other objective expressions of personal factors in political life. In the phenomena of sovereignty, as we discuss it specifically in democratic forms of government and apart from its autocratic expression in the person of an all-powerful monarch, we find then in the second place the chief objective form of our unit of investigation. If a true socialistic regime were inaugurated the social imperative would be almost entirely absorbed in the state. In modern demotic societies, however, it actually finds expression in many objective forms at the same time, and it is the chief task of sociology to trace out, analyze and correlate the objective forms of the social imperative.

The social imperative is, in the third place, a variable unit of consideration. It has found objective expression in the past in the family as the chief social institution at certain stages of economic development. In some countries at certain periods its strongest expression has been in the church. At some stages of economic development it has been chiefly voiced by individuals who have thus become the great heroes of the race and have succeeded in turning and moulding the course of development at critical periods in the world's history. This is pre-eminently true of the nature of the work and influence of Jesus, and in general of all the great religious teachers of the race. Whatever the nature of the social imperative and however manifold the forms it may take in a given society, the modifications produced always depend in the ultimate analysis upon economic considerations, that is, upon our sensory knowledge of our physical environment and upon our development in the utilization of that environment. Hence sociology must

work with the results of economics as a foundation, but with complexes of elements in the mental attitudes of individuals which both economics and psychology will analyze for us. Professor Patten, in speaking of the development of the sensory powers being checked in their growth by limiting requisites among the elements of which the world is made up, says:

“The determining conditions are certain aggregates, such as soils, rocks, mineral deposits, rivers, seas, peculiar plants, animals and combinations of moisture and heat. Sensory phenomena cannot acquire an importance unless they indicate some limiting aggregate and are joined with some motor reaction which affects an adjustment. The mental units formed by contact with these aggregates are complex, partly motor and partly sensory. The social concepts belong to this class. They are not the outcome of mere contact with forces and elements of nature, but are due to the necessities of the limiting aggregates. Sociology has nothing to do with sensory or motor phenomena as such, nor with any isolated development of either sensory or motor distinctions. Psychic phenomena become social only when motor reactions of some kind accompany sensory perceptions. The sensory ideas stimulated by external conditions must, to become social phenomena, produce feelings of pleasure or pain, of fear or love, of desire or antipathy, of attraction or repulsion. The social unit is an aggregate of these two elements, and the form of the social phenomena depends on the way they are compounded.”*

The social imperative is just such a complex in the mental life of the individual the moment he faces another individual whom he regards as in some sense identical with himself, or whenever he confronts a situation demanding action and in which he recognizes elements of personality which he either identifies with himself or connected with which in higher stages of development he perceives likenesses and is conscious of kindred interests, motives, desires and attainments. Viewed in the light of the social imperative as a unit of consideration, social phenomena may be

* Patten, “Relation of Sociology to Psychology,” *ANNALS*, Vol. viii, p. 439., Nov., 1896.

studied connectedly and with more unity by writers who approach them from the distinctly sociological side. It is proposed, therefore, with a view to securing a common starting-point in sociological inquiries, a common meeting-ground in the comparison of results and perhaps in the philosophical analysis of the nature of the abstract concept of a social imperative, a common goal for sociological investigation.

It now remains for me to say a word about some other concepts which have been treated in an analogous manner to the suggestions that I have made concerning the social imperative: I. The family. Schaeffle, in his "*Bau und Leben des sozialen Körpers*," says: "The family is the simplest vital unit in societary organization (*des Gesellschaftskörpers*), as the organic cell is the elementary unit of an organic body."* Comte wrote many years earlier:

"As every system must be composed of elements of the same nature with itself, the scientific spirit forbids us to regard society as composed of individuals. The true social unit is certainly the family—reduced, if necessary, to the elementary couple which forms its basis. This consideration implies more than the physiological truth that families become tribes, and tribes become nations: so that the whole human race might be conceived of as the gradual development of a single family, if local diversities did not forbid such a supposition. There is a political point of view from which also we must consider this elementary idea, inasmuch as the family presents the true germ of the various characteristics of the social organism. Such a conception is intermediate between that of the idea of the individual and that of the species or society." †

Some combination of these views which regard the family as a *micro-societas* and as an organic unit in a social organism has been held by doubtless the majority of sociological writers from Comte's time to the present day. It is, however, essentially a mechanical view of the phenomena of human society. The historical development of what we call

* Vol. i, p. 66, second edition.

† "Positive Philosophy," Vol. ii, Book vi, cap. v, p. 280, Bohn's Library edition, 1896.

society lends some support to it upon first glance. The important part which the family as a social institution has doubtless played in the early stages of social growth as specially the emphasis laid upon it in the records we have of primitive social life would naturally suggest such an analysis. Some writers have likened the family to the cell in the organism and pressed the analogy much farther than Schäffle is willing to go. The mechanical nature of the concept is brought out still more clearly by others who treat it as a structural unit, which, when multiplied by a numerical coefficient, will give a clan, a tribe, a nation. It is this point of view, this method of looking at human society that is responsible for the barren results of much sociological writing. Those who are content to still regard the family as a micro-societas are compelled to rely on useless analogies whenever they meet the facts of the modern world in which we live. If the family is a true micro-societas there ought to be few difficulties in building up a theory of society. We would not need go farther than to study the nature of the family bond, the activities and development of family life. It is quite possible that human society has corresponded at some stages of its development fairly well to the social life of the isolated family where there were few or no social influences outside of the family ones. But even such a state of affairs can hardly be called society in the sense in which we now use the term. Such conditions could have existed only before the race had as yet grown into the possibilities of society in the proper sense of the word. No population could long have remained in that condition, and nowhere on the earth do such conditions probably exist to-day. We cannot refer all social phenomena to the family group, nor do individuals share in social life and partake of its benefits nor receive the major part of their training for social efficiency and social participation in the modern family as constituted in the highest civilizations.

Even the mass of social wealth can scarcely be said to be in the form of family possessions as Schäffle claims, and individuals certainly share in social wealth more and more by virtue of their membership in other forms of social organization, *e. g.*, the state, the city, the club and association, and the thousand forms of so-called voluntary association. The modern family in its relation to the other individuals of modern society is a protected group whose aim is to increase the satisfactions of its individual members in the consumption of wealth. It is therefore more often, as Plato correctly analyzed it, anti-social in the broad sense of the term.

II. The social man. If it were possible to enumerate a certain number of qualities which under all social conditions and all forms of society would characterize the truly social individual, we might adopt as a unit of investigation the social man. It would be necessary, however, in the enumeration of these characteristics or qualities to anticipate the modifications of the societary process in various stages of social growth, which would be impossible. The unit, moreover, is too variable a one to be of practical value. Like the family, the social man as a unit would embody in objective form the process which the sociologist desires to study in the making and rather from the subjective side. We also want to know of the failures in this social process as well as of the successes, and our unit of consideration must be one that will keep us at every stage of investigation close to the forces producing social changes. It may be profitable as well as interesting to attempt descriptions of a very general character of the truly social man or social classes in the community, as Professor Giddings has already done * in the following words:

“The social class is made up of those whose dispositions and abilities enable and impel them to make positive contributions to

* See article, “Is the Term Social Classes a Scientific Category?” *Proceedings of National Conference of Charities and Correction*, 1895.

that sum of helpful relations and activities which we call society.
 They are the social who can and will give of their
 thought and culture, of their sympathy and resources, for the pleasure,
 the advancement and the well-being of their fellowmen.
 Ability and willingness to devote life and means to the
 defence and amelioration of the existing social order always has
 been and always must be the test of positively social qualities in
 the larger sense."

More than general descriptions of this kind can scarcely be attempted, and they are only useful in pointing out the social man among other social products and cannot be taken as an analysis of the central factor in the socializing process in general.

III. The social type. In the sense of a type of personality the idea of a social type has figured to some extent in sociological literature. If I understand Professor Giddings rightly, his principle of "consciousness of kind" finds its objective realization in a succession of types of personality. One of his pupils, Dr. John Franklin Crowell, has subjected this thought to a thorough philosophical analysis in a recent volume.* Dr. Crowell distinguishes between social types and sociological types, meaning by the former the existing types of personality in any given society and by the latter the ideally possible types in the evolution of the same society. "The sociological type is selective: it indicates the logically normal adjustment of all specific tendencies of social development within the same social organization."† He defines the idea of type as follows: "The type in its objective sense, as a part of the social process, is a representative example of a class or group."‡ The social type is then defined as "the aggregation of organic beings of like organic type."§ These words are not intended,

* "Logical Process of Social Development." New York, 1898.

† Ibid, p. 70.

‡ Ibid, p. 14.

§ Ibid, p. 41.

however, to refer merely to groups of individuals, but to isolated individuals as well, for farther on we read:*

“Types of personality appear conspicuously in the personages upon whom social functions devolve, or whom custom has trained to follow a groove, generation after generation. The former we see in the diplomat, the latter in the peasant. More obscurely, but not less really social, types are definable in all groups or classes of like kinds of persons. There is the typical childhood, the typical old age, the typical parent, the typical teacher. Yet the type and the group are to be distinguished. The social type is a set of social qualities or characters belonging to a class as a whole and substantially found in each of its members.”

The sociological type to which Dr. Crowell refers is “either a potentially normal type of personality or a theoretically superior type of social organization projected as a goal of practice.” Dr. Crowell asks us to concentrate attention on the selective survival of sociological types. He conceives of the social process as a typological series in which we have in addition to the social and the sociological types below the social the *organic type*, or that which is given in nature before the societary process begins, and above the sociological type the ideal type, which is that conceived of as desirable apart from all considerations of conditions which limit the attainability of any type.

“This series begins in organic types and ends in ideal types, but its central feature is the relation of the social type already developed with the potentially normal types. . . . The social process, for one large portion of mankind and for nearly all of primitive mankind, no doubt, must have been, and is now, regarded as a natural process—natural in the sense of being largely dominated by forces little higher in the scale of tendencies than that of the superior non-human animals. . . . One cannot look long upon the great bulk of mankind, with all its aspirations that differentiate it from the lower animals, and balk this conclusion—that for the greater portion of man’s career upon the earth and for the greater portion of the persons now alive upon its face the social process is still predominantly a natural process of organic survival. The

*Ibid, p. 48.

weak physical types fail to survive and are eliminated. The strong guide the race. So far, then, as the social process is dominated by natural forces by which its tendencies are limited and its types of personality evolved we cannot go far wrong in saying that the social process is a selective process whose types survive by virtue of their efficiency in providing for the natural requisites of social existence. The social process is rightly regarded, therefore, from the point of view of nature as a process of the survival of *organic* types by natural selection of associative relations. Natural selection defines the minimum limit of typical development in society. The organic type of personality is the basis of the typological series. Hence physical culture of the organic type of personality is the natural basis of education. The process of race-development, on the other hand, is a process of selective development toward the *ideal* type as the *maximum* limit of development in society."

Summed up in a few words, Dr. Crowell would have us, from the point of view of sociological theory, examine all social phenomena only in their relation to types of personality and then study the interaction of these several types on each other with a view to estimating their relative worth to society and with the purpose of disseminating both the ideal and possibly attainable types of greatest worth. From this point of view sociology would become the chief guide in educational philosophy. To this view of the study and analysis of social phenomena I would make two general objections. In the first place, we would be dealing here again with the objective results of social development rather than with the essence of the process itself. In the second place, it is scarcely conceivable that we could hope ever to have any generally accepted common measure of type, especially in the case of sociological and ideal types, or reasonably expect to reach a common agreement concerning a concrete statement of what these types are for any given society. What is a potentially normal type in our present day American society? Upon what authority and by what means of investigation are such types to be determined? Such questions and many more that might be asked at the outset open up endless discussion and offer little hope that the idea

of a type of personality as an abstraction would prove to be a practically useful or desirable unit of sociological investigation.

In contrast with the three concepts to which we have briefly referred, the social imperative is a concept that brings us at once to the vital point in the examination on their subjective side of any group of social phenomena. It lies at the basis of the æsthetic feelings which are of great social significance, and furthermore, it offers endless opportunity for an analysis of the social process in its manifold objective manifestations in social organizations, institutions and customs. To view the facts of social life as they relate to some social imperative, to measure the reactions of individuals both quantitatively and qualitatively in the past and present history of human society, and finally to study the nature of social imperatives through their analysis and classification should be a chief aim of sociology.

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